

SIXTH DISTRICT COURT OF APPEAL OF FLORIDA

Dathan A. Griffin v. Christine Pearson, as Personal Representative of the Estate of Martha Harwell Tiller

Griffin v. Pearson · No. 6D2023-3268 · Decided July 25, 2025

SUMMARY

The Sixth District Court of Appeal dismissed Dathan A. Griffin’s appeal for lack of jurisdiction. The court held that Griffin lacked standing to challenge admission of the decedent’s 2012 will because he was not an “interested person” under section 731.201(23), Florida Statutes. Griffin was neither a beneficiary, personal representative, nor estate creditor, and his claimed expenditures relating to adverse possession did not give him a sufficient interest in the probate proceeding.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Sixth District Court of Appeal of Florida
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Traver, C.J.; Wozniak, J.; Gannam, J.
JURISDICTION	Florida Sixth District Court of Appeal
DECIDED	July 25, 2025
DOCKET	6D2023-3268
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Griffin appealed an order overruling his objection to the proposed admission of Tiller's 2012 will to probate. The appellate court dismissed the appeal for lack of jurisdiction because Griffin was not an interested person under the Florida Probate Code.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	De novo review of the trial court's interpretation of the Probate Code and of whether Griffin had standing to proceed under it.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published
PARTIES	Dathan A. Griffin v. Christine Pearson, as Personal Representative of the Estate of Martha Harwell Tiller

TOPICS

- probate procedure
- appellate jurisdiction
- will contests
- statutory interpretation
- adverse possession

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Griffin had standing and qualified as an interested person under section 731.201(23), Florida Statutes, to challenge admission of Tiller's 2012 will to probate.
2. Whether the appellate court had jurisdiction under Florida Rule of Appellate Procedure 9.170(b) to review the order overruling Griffin's objection to admission of the will.

HOLDINGS

1. Griffin was not an interested person under section 731.201(23), Florida Statutes, and therefore lacked standing to participate in Tiller's probate proceeding. A stranger to the estate whose claimed interest consists only of expenditures made after the decedent's death to advance an adverse-possession claim is not an interested person on these facts.
2. The court lacked jurisdiction because Florida Rule of Appellate Procedure 9.170(b) limits review of probate orders to orders that finally determine a right or obligation of an interested person, and Griffin was not an interested person.
3. The court must apply the supremacy-of-the-text principle and interpret the words of section 731.201(23) in context, exhausting relevant textual and structural clues and considering the purpose and subject matter of the proceeding.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Our jurisdiction to review probate orders is “limited to orders that finally determine a right or obligation of an interested person as defined in the Florida Probate Code.”” (at 2)

“Standing is a legal concept that requires a would-be litigant to demonstrate that he or she reasonably expects to be affected by the outcome of the proceedings, either directly or indirectly.” (at 3)

““Florida’s Probate Code serves many purposes. Chief among them is to promote the timely settlement of a decedent’s estate.”” (at 4)

“The trial court correctly ruled that Griffin lacked standing to participate in Tiller’s probate proceeding, which means he is not an interested person under the Probate Code.” (at 5)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Martha Harwell Tiller died in September 2022, and her 2012 will named Christine Pearson as personal representative and named Pearson and Bette Kasch as beneficiaries. In March 2023, Griffin, who was homeless, moved into Tiller's vacant home, claimed to have paid its 2022 real estate taxes to support an adverse-possession claim, and spent time and money cleaning the property. Neither the 2012 will nor a 1979 will Griffin discovered identified him as a personal representative, beneficiary, or otherwise connected him to the estate; the trial court also determined that he was not an estate creditor.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

After Tiller's death, Griffin moved into her former home, located a 1979 will, and sought to invalidate the 2012 will. The trial court ruled that Griffin lacked standing to challenge the will and later overruled his objection to its admission to probate. Griffin appealed the latter order; the Sixth District Court of Appeal dismissed the appeal because the order did not finally determine a right or obligation of an interested person.

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- William F. Hayes, Jr., et al. v. Guardianship of Mae E. Thompson, etc., Hayes v. Guardianship of Thompson, 952 So. 2d 498, 505, 507-08 (Fla. 2006)
- Duff-Esformes v. Mukamal, 332 So. 3d 17, 19 (Fla. 3d DCA 2021)
- Seaside Town Council, Inc. v. Seaside Community Development Corp., 347 So. 3d 89, 95 (Fla. 1st DCA 2021)
- Pradaxay v. Kendrick, 387 So. 3d 437, 439-40 (Fla. 6th DCA 2024)
- Ham v. Portfolio Recovery Assocs., LLC, 308 So. 3d 942, 946 (Fla. 2020)
- Conage v. United States, 346 So. 3d 594, 598 (Fla. 2022)
- Tsuji v. Fleet, 326 So. 3d 143, 145 (Fla. 1st DCA 2021)
- In re Jeffries' Estate, 181 So. 833, 837 (Fla. 1938)
- Cruz v. Neely, 319 So. 3d 730, 730 (Fla. 3d DCA 2021)

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